BEHOLD A NEW THING
Isaiah 43:14-21
May 19, 1968

There is probably nothing quite so difficult as coping with something brand new. it is never easy to see a new thing. Our minds are connectional devices which operate by establishing links between that which it familiar and that which is to be learned - and something altogether new cannot be linked or related to anything. Like a computer that shorts its circuits trying to assimilate a piece of information for which it is not already programmed, the human mind frequently rejects newness of any sort. Newness is unsettling: it cannot be categorized. Newness is discomforting because it cannot be predicted.

But beyond this, something new often repels us because it always involves a certain risk. A commitment to a new idea, a new nation, a new job, even a new wife does involve a step into the unknown - that is - a personal risk. This is so simply because we are never in a position to predict the implications and end-results of any new venture. By its very nature newness is synonymous with an uncharted course into an unknown future.

Consider, for instance, the birth of a child. I think all of us look back with fondness at our naivete prior to the birth of our first child. All our planning and arranging was not sufficient to prepare us for that day the two of us became three. What parent among us does not periodically find himself amazed at the newness - the unrehearsed quality of life actuated in him by the simple fact that he is a parent?

On a personal level, newness of any type is difficult to comprehend, difficult to anticipate and difficult to assimilate even when it comes. And if this is true personally, it is even more significant on a broader, historical level. Generally speaking, we are very much bound to the immediacies of the present tense: we lack what the scholar would call, "historical perspective". That means, simply, that very few of us are able to understand the long-range significance of the very events in which we are participating.

Fortunately, however, there are in every age men who rise above the crowd and remind us of the significance contemporary events have within the whole context of history. Winston Churchill was abundantly that kind of man, one who long before the rest of his countrymen intuitively sensed the threat of Nazism, and who then chronicled the war, battle by battle, not for the sake of a dry record but with the vision of one who comprehends the meaning and long range significance of events even while they are happening.

I think John F. Kennedy was another such man with a perspective for history. He was keenly aware, as no other president since Lincoln, of the historical significance that attaches to the presidency. He knew that the destiny of America, and in a larger sense, the fate of mankind rested on small, seemingly insignificant decisions made by individually insignificant men: and everything we did, was done in this context of historical perspective.

Such a man was also the prophet who wrote the portion of scripture read this morning as the Old Testament lesson. He too was a man who possessed the "over-view". From his position in Jerusalem he could see the significance of events happening on the horizon, and he saw his prophetic task in terms of announcing that significance.

Most of his countrymen were captives in Babylon. More accurately, they had been captives: they were taken as exiles from their own land after the Babylonian armies overran Jerusalem. But after several decades their captivity had evolved into a rather comfortable sojourn. They had begun to put down roots: some had adopted Babylonian customs. The temporary exile began to look like a permanent arrangement.

But the captive Jews in Babylon were blind to a new thing that was happening. To the NorthEast the Persian armies of Cyrus the Great were gathering momentum - and the Babylonian empire was living on borrowed time. The prophet saw in this historic drama the hand of God working to redeem his people. This is the burden of a letter he wrote to them, the letter which occupies the 40th through the 55th Chapters of the Book of Isaiah. It begins with the moving and familiar words, "Comfort, Comfort my people, says your God," and rises to prophetic articulation in the imperative, urgently stated, "Behold, I am doing a new thing: now it springs forth: do you not perceive it?"

I am bringing all of this to your attention because the Jews, like many people before and after them, were afflicted with a certain near-sightedness, and could not see the new thing that was already happening. They were bound up in the present tense, the mundane matters of daily living and therefore insulated from the great historical drama into which they were being drawn. In retrospect, we look through the eyes of faith and believe that God was acting to redeem and renew his people. We know that Cyrus did defeat the Babylonians and did send the Jews across the desert to their homeland, and did grant religious freedom to the extent that the period became a renaissance of the Israelite faith. We've had 2,500 years to think about it. But they did not know it, until the prophet called their attention to it, and even then they probably passed him off as a pious visionary - even as we would be wont to do.

This transaction is important today, because whether we are aware of it or not, we are involved in a great new thing: a movement involving millions upon millions of people: a movement that will one day loom large in history. This will be known as the ecumenical era - but I fear that most of us, most of the time, are afflicted with that same near-sightedness that prohibited the Jews from seeing what was happening to them.

When we reflect on the events of just the past decade it is clear that something new is happening to the people of God with a bewildering rate of speed. As a boy, in the pre-ecumenical era, I was cast in my neighborhood as a peacemaker between the Roman Catholic Shaughnessy children on our left, and the Conservative Baptist Esteps on our right, a combination that seemed intent on fighting the 30 years War all over again. The only thing the two hostile factions ever agreed on was the fact that the Presbyterian Buchanans were doomed. John Shaughnessy was quite certain that I was going to hell and apparently he had it on good authority. One day I went to Confession with him, and Frank Estep was equally certain that I was going to hell because I had seen the evil interior of a Confessional. And my Presbyterian father despaired that I did not have any Presbyterian friends who neither knew nor cared who was going to hell. We have come a long way. Newness has happened - often in spite of us.

Newness is happening rapidly - so rapidly in fact that seven local congregations decided to exchange delegates on this day, and before we even sat down to talk about it, the seven separate denominations had become six. Just three weeks ago the Evangelical United Brethren Church and the Methodist Church merged to become the United Methodist Church.

Now what exactly is happening and who among us are seeing it. Specifically the Consultation on Church Union has happened and is happening. In 1960 four denominations, responding to a sermon preached by Eugene Carson Blake in Grace Cathedral, San Francisco, entered a loose coalition to explore the possibilities of future merger. That coalition grew to 10 member denominations including 25 million Protestants. Meeting annually it has set down guidelines in theology and structure and mission, and recently committed itself to some kind of real oneness by 1970 at the latest.

But the Consultation on Church Union is not the whole story by any means, nor has it happened spontaneously. In a sense, if we can use some "historical perspectives" the Consultation is the most recent manifestation of a process that began at the time of the Protestant Reformation. That event, marked a renewal of the church of Jesus Christ in diversity. Our common reformed tradition begins then and has sought separate tributaries for 450 years. But in the early years the process of diversity and separation began to slow down and reverse itself. Particularly in the area of missionary activity major Christian bodies began to work together in the early 1900's and in that common missionary concern the Ecumenical Movement was born.

The World Council of Churches, the National Council of Churches and an abundance of state, county and local councils came into being and gave concrete expression to the new movement toward oneness. Vatican II broke in on the scene infused with the spirit of John XXIII and the doors of understanding and communication have been wide open ever since.

And now COCU - a dramatic new thing happening in our very midst. I want very briefly to say three things about this matter that concerns us greatly on this day.

First - the aim of the Consultation, "a united Church, truly catholic, truly reformed, truly evangelical" is terribly practical. Speaking in terms of pure pragmatism, some kind of structural unity will inevitably make the church a more effective servant of her Lord. Let me illustrate by way of my own experience.

I am involved in the work of National Missions and one of our primary concerns at present is the Town and Country Church. In hundreds of towns and hamlets in Indiana there are four, five, ten small churches, each struggling to stay alive, each competing fiercely in a static or declining population, each doing less than it ought to be doing because the first concern is just to stay alive. Each denomination involved, with a few notable exceptions, is theoretically committed to merger consolidation, on the premise that a united church of 500 members is going to do a better job for the community than 10 churches with 50 members. But at present the process by which these mergers is brought about is nightmarishly complex. Five or six committees meet, five or six denominational executives negotiate, months pass, and then - maybe - we get action. Structural unity would be, in this case, the greatest thing that could happen to bring new life to the rural churches.

Along with this I believe we must understand that unity does not necessarily mean the death of our separate traditions. Each one of us is rooted in our own traditions: thereare things about our churches that we hold very dear. Church Union does not mean the demise of this at all. Let me quote from "Principles of Church Union" published by COCU; "Visible unity should take away from us nothing except our separateness, and add to our common treasury as much as possible of what is good and true in the tradition of the constituting churches" (p.14)

Church union is, first of all, practical: but more importantly I believe it is the will of God. We share one extremely important conviction at this point: that is, that the Church belongs to God. He created it: he calls man into it: he sustains it and guides it and stirs it up and renews it and sends it ever out into the world - not just the Presbyterian Church - nor the Methodists - nor the Catholics - but His Church, comprised of all men who confess Jesus Christ as their Lord and Savior. I think we need to think about the Church in those terms: I think we need to understand that the degree to which our local congregations, and our denominations, are ours, is the degree to which they cease being part of the Church of Jesus Christ. We're not talking about private clubs at this point; local associations of congenial people - but the people of one God called by Him to one mission in one world.

In the Garden of Gethsemane Jesus prayed for his disciples, anticipating the difficult days ahead, and this is what he said: "Holy Father, keep them in thy name which thou hast given me, that they may be one, even as we are one." (John 17:11)

We are already one. Our unity was born in that prayer, in that Lord who called to him not Episcopalians, Congregationalists and Baptists - but all men. Certainly Church Union is the will of God.

Third, lastly, most importantly of all: I believe the primary mover behind all of this is God himself. Of course, that is a confessional statement and not easy to document. But the men who are directly involved, the best men we have in our respective denominations, the men whose lives have been given to the service of one denomination, do not hesitate to testify that theSpirit is moving in their midst. They express an urgency, a reckless abandon, an immediacy that is infectious.

Recently I was engaged in conversation with an individual who felt that the whole ecumenical endeavor was the work of the Communists. I find this not only preposterous, but bereft of any confidence that the Holy Spirit is a reality in

the Church. It is not plot. It is rather the Spirit of God himself, moving inexorably, inevitably, mysteriously, to bring down the barriers we have built between us, to bring us to concrete expression of the oneness he has already given us in Jesus Christ? I believe it is so.

A new thing is happening. We live in a world that cannot be bothered with Christian "in-fighting", a world grown cynical at the sinful competitiveness between the followers of Jesus. It is a world that needs to know the love and grace of God: a world badly in need of the Gospel of Jesus Christ. That Gospel is not fragmented: it comes to all men through the Church - as it faithfully obeys its Lord. It is this that adds urgency to the concern for oneness and unity.

"Behold, I am doing a new thing:
now it springs forth, do you not perceive it?"

"Holy Father, keep them in thy name, that they may be one."

Amen.

O Thou eternal God, we are grateful for the moving of thy spirit again within thy Church. Keep us from smugness in our own traditions: break down the walls between us: draw us together - that thy church might be renewed and strengthened. Through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.